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Trail ends for wildlife volunteers

State decommissions its team of unpaid deputy conservation officers

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For more than a century, they served as vital backup for New Jersey's small force of wildlife police officers.

Unpaid deputy conservation officers, armed and extensively trained, helped their full-time counterparts track down poachers illegally shooting deer, and black marketers trying to sell the fur, bones or body parts of bears or beaver.

They investigated dumping in state forests and reports of people tearing up ecologically sensitive trails with all-terrain vehicles.

Rick Chiusolo, 47, a 20-year deputy from Glassboro, often sacrificed his vacations to help New Jersey's 55 full-time conservation officers protect the environment and enforce hunting and fishing regulations.

"I'd do at least 120 hours in a year, and some years when I was younger, easily more than 200 hours," he said.

Not any more. Chiusolo and other deputies are mothballing their uniforms, badges and sidearms. Initiated by state law in 1896, the state's deputy program has been decommissioned, a victim of budget shortfalls and concerns about insurance liability.

"It's been a difficult decision," said Tim Cussens, chief of the Bureau of Law Enforcement with the state Division of Fish and Wildlife. "I relied a great deal on my deputies when I was a field officer. This is not a popular decision."

The last patrol involving a deputy took place Jan. 31. A week ago, Cussens broke the news to the state Fish and Game Council.

The decision, he said, followed meetings by a 15-member panel of training officers, former officers, deputies, union representatives, state lawyers and division administrators.

The panel concluded that while the state spends more than \$30,000 annually recruiting and training deputies, it would have to spend far more over the next five years to increase insurance coverage and training to protect the deputies and the state from potential lawsuits in the future.

"Unfortunately, the cost of doing it is just under \$1 million," Cussens said.

The deputy program had been a starting point for many of the state's full-time officers. Dave Chanda, director of the state Division of Fish and Game, worked as a deputy years ago. But while the state boasted more than 100 deputies in the early 1990s, it had only 29 deputies on patrol last month.

The pressures of constant, annual training to address insurance concerns left only the most dedicated, who had spent as much as \$2,000 of their own money during their volunteer careers to purchase uniforms, gear and guns to meet increasing standards.

"It was long in coming, a decision that took several years to make ... and we thought it was just necessary to do," said the division's deputy director, Lawrence Herrighty.

Liability concerns came to a head, authorities said, after the 2006 fatal shooting of a member of the Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation by a state park police officer during a violent confrontation in the forested hills of Bergen County. The shooting unfolded after several park officers pursued people they said were illegally riding all-terrain vehicles.

One park officer was indicted last year on a charge of reckless manslaughter, and a tribe member was indicted on a charge of beating a female park officer with her own baton. The criminal cases, as well as lawsuits, are pending.

"This probably wouldn't be an issue if not for the incident on Ramapo Mountain," Cussens told the Fish and Game Council.

Though no conservation officers or deputies were involved, the state concluded it could not properly protect the deputies from the possibility of litigation if an arrest turned violent.

Chiusolo disagreed with the conclusion, saying he believed deputies were immune from liability under the federal Volunteer Protection Act, which safeguards volunteers with nonprofit organizations from civil claims. State authorities, however, contend it does not cover "nontraditional" law enforcement officers like the deputies.

For now, New Jersey's 55 full-time conservation officers will patrol alone, and that's already posing complications. Bureau operating procedures, for instance, require that two officers be assigned to some tasks, such as night patrols. Deputies often helped fill out those two-man teams.

"Now, they're going to have to pay two full-time officers to patrol together," said Harley Simons, 51, a Pemberton resident who worked as a deputy for 17 years. "I don't know how they'll do it without deputies."

When he was out on patrol, Simons often brought along his dog, a field spaniel trained to track and to sniff out weapons and ammunition. The dog came in handy when people tried to hide guns in the woods, he said.

Chiusolo said the full-time force is already spread too thin as it tries to cover the entire state.

"Dumping will increase," he said. "And how can we acquire more Green Acres land when we don't have enough manpower to patrol what we already have?"

He said he worried, too, about the safety of officers on patrol alone. While the job is different than it was a century ago, when two New Jersey "game wardens" were murdered by poachers, officers still deal at times with armed and uncooperative people. In such situations, Chiusolo said, officers "need a second pair of eyes."

Beyond the safety issue, the deputies say they will miss doing a job they have come to love, one that allowed them to work in the outdoors, even if it left them less time to enjoy the kinds of activities -- hunting and fishing, for example -- that drew them to the job in the first place.

"What makes someone want to do it? That's hard to say," Simons said. "What makes a volunteer fireman do what he does? That can be dangerous work, too. I'm really going to miss it. I don't think it's fully sunk in. I'm having a real hard time letting go."